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ABSTRACT

Concentrating on five ways in which foreign language teaching can be aided by linguistic science, the Committee on Language Programs, established by the American Council of Learned Societies, expresses its support of the National Defense Education Act of 1958, Title VI; and the Language Development Section of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Action taken by the U.S. Office of Education, praised by the committee, deals with linguistics and: (1) language institutes, (2) research in language and area centers, (3) contracts awarded for contrastive linguistic analyses, and (4) government support of the Modern Language Association for its contribution in this area. (RL)

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THE ROLE OF LINGUISTICS AND LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS IN PROGRAMS UNDER TITLE VI OF THE NATIONAL DEFENSE EDUCATION ACT OF 1958

A statement by the
Committee on Language Programs,
American Council of Learned Societies

Title VI of the National Defense Education Act of 1958 calls explicitly for the improvement of foreign language teaching by training teachers in "the use of new teaching methods and instructional materials." It also mentions linguistics as a field in which individuals may need training in order to achieve the objectives of the Act.

The Committee on Language Programs, a continuation of a committee established by the American Council of Learned Societies in 1942 to aid in the development of foreign language training programs in the military services during World War II, and subsequently reorganized in 1946 to assist in various civilian language teaching endeavors, wishes to go on record as expressing its satisfaction at the fact that in passing the National Defense Education Act the Congress appeared to recognize the potentially important role of modern linguistic science in the improvement of language teaching.

It further wishes to make note of the manner in which the U. S. Office of Education in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare has addressed itself to the task of implementing the provisions of Title VI. The Committee is pleased that the Language Development Section of that Office has demonstrated its readiness to support experimentation in the application of structural linguistics to foreign language teaching.

Among the actions taken by the U. S. Office of Education with which we are particularly gratified we may cite the following:

(1) the strong encouragement given to language institutes to incorporate the teaching of linguistics and linguistic analysis as an essential part of their programs;

(2) the requirements and specifications laid down for language and area centers which give prominence to linguistic research as a tool in language study;

(3) the awarding of contracts calling for the preparation of contrastive linguistic analyses for several important languages; and

(4) the support given the Modern Language Association in its desire to assure the qualification of language teachers in those aspects of linguistic analysis which are relevant to language teaching methodology.

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The Committee hopes that these and similar actions will be continued and strengthened in the further implementation of the National Defense Education Act.

Some of the more important ways in which foreign language teaching can be aided by linguistic science are these.

(1) The scientific analysis of the language to be taught. Above all, the teacher of a foreign language will be aided by a knowledge of what linguistic analysis shows about the language he is teaching. Linguistic analysis seeks to be able to specify, in the greatest precision and detail one may desire:

(a) the system of mutually contrasting basic sounds (phonemes) which operate in the language, together with the conditions under which these sounds appear in variant forms and the ways in which the sounds compose syllables and words;
(b) the grammar of the language, stated not in traditional terms of Western philosophy but in terms of the system of form classes, inflections, constructions, sentence-types, and grammatical rules which actually function in the language as determined by the analysis of utterances;
(c) the system of meanings embodied in the vocabulary of the language, and which are specific to that language, and
(d) the various forms, levels, and dialects of a language and the circumstances under which they are used.

(2) The study of the contrasts between the learner's native language and the language being learned. Scientific linguistics can isolate and draw attention to the specific items in a language which are most dissimilar to corresponding items in the learner's native language and which will hence be likely to demand more attention and effort in teaching. In order to do this, linguists have recently turned their attention to the careful analysis of the English language as well as foreign languages.

(3) The study of the physiology of sound production in the context of the significant features of the language. The teacher will be aided by a knowledge of certain relevant essentials of the science of articulatory phonetics, which is a part of the general area of linguistics, but even more by a knowledge of the relation between phonetics and phonemics. Scientific linguistics has shown that pronunciation drills in isolation and divorced from the functioning system of a language are useless if not actually harmful.

(4) The study of the writing system and its relation to the spoken language. Just as linguistic analysis can study the system of sounds employed in a language, it can also study the system of writing and its relation to the sounds which it is supposed to represent. It can provide accurate information on the features of a writing system and hence supply orderly guides for the learner.

(5) Considerations of the nature of language. The specific contributions of linguistic science in this area can be stated in terms of a very few generalizations of far-reaching importance. Perhaps the most influential of these is the following: language as a form of human communication characteristically exists as a system of spoken communication and only derivatively as a system of written communication; for general purposes of language learning, therefore, the spoken language--auditory comprehension and oral production--should be given first consideration.

It has been, and will be said, of course, that many teachers of foreign languages are able to achieve good results without the explicit aid of the various kinds of linguistic knowledge outlined here. This may very well be true, but we believe that a careful consideration of the bases of successful teaching will reveal that it can often be traced to a kind of "native wisdom" or intuitive grasp

of the very facts and attitudes taught by linguistic science, combined with the use of teaching materials which have indeed been influenced by the findings of linguistic science.

In any case, we are persuaded that foreign language teaching can be very significantly aided by explicit use of the best linguistic knowledge. On these grounds, we trust that the implementation of the National Defense Education Act will continue to accord due recognition to the role of linguistic science in all activities pertaining to the furtherance of better language teaching.

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